

Aviation in Chadron, Nebraska

By Todd Rickenbach

The city of Chadron, Nebraska is reaching an important milestone this year. This summer, we will celebrate our quasiquicentennial or 125 anniversary of the existence of the city. In 1885 the approximate 500 residents of the town of O'Linn, which was located near where our airport is located present day, moved overnight to the present site of Chadron. The Railroad coming to the area was the reason the town was moved.

As with many anniversaries and milestones, we take a moment to reflect on how the past has gotten us to where we are today. As a local aviator, I decided to look back into the history of aviation in the Chadron area and how it contributed to the success of the city.

The first airplane came to Chadron in 1911 as part of the Dawes County Fair. Touring stunt flyers were a big hit during this time period. The 1916 Dawes County Fair featured Miss Catherine Stinson, who was 20 years old at the time, billed as the first girl to put on an aerial show in Nebraska.

Aviation was slow to grow in the area until the late 1930s. A man named Arden E. Hixson had researched a government plan to teach college students to fly. The United States Government foresaw the need for pilots as World War II loomed in the near future. Arden approached Mr. Elliot and Mr. Rouse who were faculty at Chadron State Teachers College and convinced them to apply for the program. The next step was to approach the city and secure a site. The city had a piece of property, which is where the current site is, they were willing to designate as the airport. Arden and many of the other would be students went to the site and began clearing a path in the property which was covered in cactus using hand shovels, hoes and rake. The work was progressing slowly and a local County Commissioner came by and offered the use of a county grader to scrape off the rest of the cactus plants and smooth the new runway.

Arden also spoke with the only pilot in the area at the time. Frank Snook was living near Crawford Nebraska, which is 23 miles west of Chadron. Frank was making his living by hunting coyotes from his airplane at the time. Frank agreed with Arden about the opportunity they had with the college resources and joined forces getting the program started. Frank went to Kansas City, Missouri for his indoctrination. A Professor Michaels and a few other instructors agreed to take on the ground school and the program "took off" because Chadron State Teachers College was one of fifty five colleges approved by the Civil Aeronautics Authority for civilian pilot training. The initial quota was ten students which one could be a woman. I was unable to find the names of all of the men but the woman was longtime Chadron resident Hope (Brooker) Anderson. Hope is still alive and currently resides at the nursing home in Chadron. Frank Snook continued to flight instruct in the region well into the 1980s. He passed away in early 90s at the age of 84.

Arden completed flight training and graduated from college in 1940. He proceeded to Wichita, Kansas and enrolled at Wichita University taking cross country and aerobatic courses working toward his Commercial and Instructors Certificates completing them in late 1940. While he was in Wichita, Arden

received a call from his brother Harold back in Chadron saying he was a winner in a contest sponsored by Shell Oil Company based on his ground school grades. He met with seven other students from the central region in St. Louis, Missouri and performed flight maneuvers overhead of a group of aviation big wigs. Arden won the regional contest and proceeded to Washington, D.C. and was presented a gold watch from Jimmy Doolittle for being one of the regional contest winners. Arden was unable to pass the military eye exam to become a military aviator but spent the war working for the Army as a civilian ferry pilot. After the war, he worked for Delta Airlines for a short period of time and later worked as an Airline Operations Inspector for the C.A.A. later becoming the F.A.A.

In October 1939, the 80 x 80 hanger was completed for a price of \$16,000.00. This was part \$30,000.00 in Federal funds along with \$2000.00 used for airport purposes. This hanger is still in use today. Since the city had the new airport facilities, college and an established civilian training program. The Navy began to cycle aviation cadets through their first 8 weeks of training beginning July 12, 1942. This is considered one of the major factors which kept the college open during the war years because enrollment had dropped significantly. The college is one of our major employers today.

Like many airports at the time, the Chadron airport was converted into a civilian facility. January 2, 1949 the famous "49 blizzard" began. The Chadron airport measured 61 inches of snow during January 1949 which exceeded any place in the United States. As the country began to dig out, airplanes became a vital tool getting supplies to rural areas. The Chadron Jaycees organized "Operation Hay lift" which 1854 bales of hay were dropped from C-47 transport planes in an effort to feed livestock and wildlife.

The 1950s brought much improvement to the airport. The main runway 1-19 was paved starting with just the ends for awhile following by the complete runway later on. General aviation continued to grow and play a major part in the demand for improved facilities.

The crosswind runway 11-29 was paved and lit in 1960. In the early 1960s, Airline service began with Western Airlines as the first carrier. The original Frontier Airlines took over in the early to mid 60s and planned to use the Convair 580 aircraft. This aircraft required a longer runway that was currently in place. In 1966, runway 2-20 was constructed and the old runway 1-19 was removed. A small portion of old runway 1-19 pavement is still visible near the threshold of runway 2. The connecting taxiway and apron were also paved at this time.

Improvement to the airport continued in the 1970s. Lyle Kime was running the airport beginning in the 1960s and solicited the city for a new shop and F.B.O. building and hangers. In 1971 the first carousel hanger was built. This is a unique hanger style as four airplanes are placed on a pad which rotates with an electric motor. This eliminates having to move many airplanes to get to the one located in the back of the hanger. Lyle and his family were working on getting funds and a plan for the new shop and F.B.O. but Lyle was killed in an airplane crash in Chambers, Nebraska on January, 18 1972. The new shop and F.B.O. were constructed later in the year. Lyle was the second airport operator killed in a plane crash. Sully Luft was killed in a plane crash south of Chadron, Nebraska in the late 1950s.

In the mid 70s, airport improvements continued. 1974 saw the construction of a Crash, Fire and Rescue building along with perimeter fence. The asphalt on runway 11-29 was overlaid in 1975. Overlay work was also completed on runway 2-20 along with lighting of the taxiway in 1978. 1979 saw the construction of a twin carousel hanger allowing storage for eight more airplanes. Jim Strang took over as the airport operator in early 1970s and continued until 1984.

The 1980s began with the purchase of new snow removal equipment including a new grader, front loader and snow blower. Plans were put forth for a new administration/terminal building and it was completed in 1983. This gave a better platform to board passengers flying to Denver, Colorado and points beyond. The original Frontier Airlines pulled out of Chadron in the early 1980s and was replaced for a short time by Pioneer Airlines who operated until 1986. G. P Express took over airline operations and provided airline service until its demise in 1996. The crash of a G.P. Express flight on December 22, 1987 southwest of the airport, killing both pilots but the lone passenger surviving, accelerated plans to install an I.L.S. approach which was put in a year later. This made the instrument approaches much safer with the terrain surrounding the area and allowed a lower landing minimum resulting in fewer canceled flights. Les and Donna Mittleider relocated L & D Aero Service, Inc. from Rushville, Nebraska in 1984 to Chadron. Les previously worked for Strang Air and they were still living in the Chadron area. Consolations of the Flight Service Stations lead to the closure of the local station on December 31, 1986 which opened in the early 1940s.

So now we are up to the 1990s. A tank and pump were installed to supply Jet A fuel in the early 90s and GP Express Airlines began using turbo prop Beech 99 aircraft. P.A.P.I. lights were installed on runways 11 and 29 in 1992 and 1993. After a couple of accidents involving aircraft and deer, a perimeter fence seven foot high was installed to aid in keeping wildlife off the airport in 1995. Plans were made to redo the runways in late 90s to rebuild the runways. Runway 2-20 was rebuilt into a concrete runway in 1999 and the partial parallel taxiway bravo was constructed. Great Lakes Airlines began providing the airline service in 1996 and continues to serve the airport today with Embraer E-120 Brasilia aircraft.

The 2000s saw improvements to the airport continue. Runway 11-29 was rebuilt into a concrete runway and taxiway alpha was narrowed and rebuilt along with some of the apron in 2003. New snow removal equipment was purchased in 2005. New signage was added in 2007 to complete the standardization of the runway and taxiway signage. In July of 2006, the airport once again proved what an asset it is because a major forest fire threatened the city and surrounding area. Within 24 hours, the airport saw multiple fire fighting aircraft and served as one of the command posts for firefighting operations. Sadly, we said goodbye to Les and Donna Mittleider as they moved their business to Rapid City, SD in September 2006. Shortly after, and Airport Advisory Committee was formed consisting of local pilots and city leaders with the goal of improving relations and communication. The first items discussed were the need for a new F.B.O. and fuel systems. The old fuel pumps needed constant maintenance. A new self service fuel system for 100ll and Jet A fuel was completed in 2007. After going nearly a year without an F.B.O., Mark Hutton opened up A & M Aviation early in 2008 and continues to operate today.

The airport continues to play a major role in transportation. Current users included airline passengers, air ambulance operations, agricultural applicators, fire and rescue operations including a local Civil Air Patrol Chapter, Forest Service and general aviation operations. Looking back the airport has been a major factor in the community's success and will help guide the city into the future.

Please join us for a fly in on July 10, 2010 to celebrate the milestone of the city.

Bibliography

Chadron Centennial History 1885-1985 pages 70, 117-118.

Lecher, Belle: Chadron Golden Age Courier vol. 22; issue 1. December 2007.

Mittleider, Lester: Interview May 20, 2010.

Olsen and Associates: Airport Master Plan. Project number 3-31-00017-10

Pinkerton, Donald: Interview May 20, 2010

Wineteer, Ron: Chadron Golden Age Courier vol. 22 issue 1 and 2. January and February 2008.